

DEPENDENT ORIGINATION



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Hammalawa Saddhātissa
M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt

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When a sacred structure like a pagoda or Buddhist shrine is consecrated it is customary, in the *theravāda* countries for monks to recite the *Paticca samuppāda*, the Dependent Origination. The reason is that the Dependent Origination was realised by the Buddha with his enlightenment. When the Buddha, being fully awakened, was staying on the bank of the river Nerañjarā at the foot of the Bodhi-tree (*ficus religiosa*) for seven days experiencing the bliss of release (*vimutti sukha*), during the first, second and third watches of that night of Vesakhā full-moon day he reflected on the Dependent Origination (*Paticca samuppāda*), in direct and reverse order.

Then, having understood the matter, he uttered these solemn utterances:

“Truly, when things grow plain to the ardent meditating noble one, his doubts all vanish in that he comprehends things with cause.”

“Truly, when things grow plain to the ardent meditating noble one, his doubts all vanish in that he discerns the destruction of cause.”

“Truly, when things grow plain to the ardent meditating noble one, routing the host of Māra deos he stand like as the sun when lighting up the sky.”

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DEPENDENT ORIGINATION

The doctrine of *Paticca Samuppāda* is the real foundation on which the entire philosophy of Buddhism is built. The Buddha himself said, “O bhikkhus, one who understands this doctrine of Dependent Origination understands the Dhamma; one who understands the Dhamma, understands this doctrine of Dependent Origination.”¹ Sāntarakṣita, in his encyclopedic philosophical treatise, the *Tattvasaṅgraha*, offers his adoration to the Buddha as “The Great Sage who has preached the doctrine of *Paticca Samuppāda*.”² The three fundamental principles of Buddhism – 1) all is impermanent, 2) unsatisfactory and 3) insubstantial – are really derivative forms of this very doctrine.

The central point in this Buddhist doctrine is: there is nothing that is not dependent on something else. Nothing can arise on its own accord, independently. For example, the lamp remains burning because of the wick and this in turn is dependent upon oxygen, temperature etc. Likewise, the wick is the result of twining strands of cotton together and the oxygen is a combination of elements.

‘Dependent Origination’ means, dependent on that, this becomes. Simple examples are: there being clouds, rain falls; there being rain, the road becomes slippery; there being a slippery road, a man falls; due his falling, he is injured. Conversely, if there were no clouds, there would be no rain; if there were no rain there would be no slippery road; if

¹ M. i. 190: “Yo paticcasamuppādaṃ passati so dhammaṃ passati, yo dhammaṃ passati so paticcasamuppādaṃ passati.”

² *Tattvasaṅgraha*, vol. i.

there were no slippery road, there would be no accident arising from someone falling on it. All the known sciences are concerned with this process of thought; they only trace events backwards and forwards in the causal chain. In botany for instance, a growing plant depends upon suitable manure, etc. In physics, an engine depends on fuel, e.g. oxygen and coal.

There can be no first cause, because each cause becomes an effect and each effect a cause. Hence a first cause is quite inconceivable. As Bertrand Russell said, "There is no need to suppose a first cause at all which is due to the poverty of our imagination." The life stream flows on *ad infinitum* so long as it is fed by the muddy waters of craving, hatred and delusion. It is therefore difficult to see a beginning of things, but it is even more difficult to see an end to all things and eternity is a concept which virtually defies human imagination. Knowledge grows in proportion to our understanding correctly such causal processes. And where our scientific knowledge fails us, we often have recourse to superstition. The primitive people saw the wonders of nature and became curious to get a satisfactory explanation of them. They could not explain them scientifically, i.e. by the Law of Dependent Origination, therefore they naturally tried to explain them by some superstitious superhuman agent or agents – gods or goddesses. But history shows that any such belief in a superstitious explanation is inimical to the advancement of knowledge. The primitive man believed that the wind blew because the Wind God was going in procession to be married. If science had accepted this belief and had not tried to trace the phenomenon according to the Law of Dependent Origination, we could never have known that the movement of the wind is due to the difference of atmospheric pressure. A theistic or a superstitious explanation puts an end to all further inquiry. We cannot ask "Who created God?", or depending on what God originates. Here there is an absolute check in the advancement of knowledge.

But the Law of Dependent Origination does not investigate into the First Cause, for the very conception of a First Cause means a total check in the progress of knowledge.

Paticca Samuppāda is not, as some people erroneously suppose, the Law of Causation as understood by medieval logicians who followed Aristotle, which considers the cause and effect as two quite different events, one of which produces the other.

When examined carefully, this seems untenable. According to the Law of *Paticca Samuppāda* two events cannot be considered as quite distinct from each other for they are links of the same process, which admits of no break. No single event in the world is ever isolated. A cause, therefore, cannot stand by itself as such.

Clay is the cause of the pot, the medieval logicians would assert. Yes, the clay is certainly the cause of the pot; but it is not, by itself, sufficient for the production of the pot. If there were no water, no wheel, no potter, no effort on the part of the potter; the pot would not have been produced. All these factors are indispensable for the production of the pot. What right have we to say, therefore, that the clay is the cause of the pot? It is simply arbitrary to select one of several circumstances and call it the cause. It is not right, then, to say that clay is the cause of the pot. A better way of expressing it is: "The pot was produced depending on clay." Thus, the most scientific and rational explanation of a thing is possible only according to the Law of *Paticca Samuppāda*.

The great Buddhist Commentator, Buddhaghosa, wrote, "Dependent Origination is so deep it is as if I had fallen into the middle of the ocean when I am trying to explain it."¹

¹ Vism. 522.

It explains the cycle of lives and how man accumulates kamma and is reborn through the round of existence as depicted in the 'Wheel of Becoming' – a wheel of twelve spokes denoting the twelve links of the causal process.

- 1-2. Dependent on ignorance, intentional¹ activities arise.
3. Dependent on intentional activities, consciousness arises.
4. Dependent on consciousness, mental and physical phenomena arise.
5. Dependent on mental and physical phenomena, the six senses arise.
6. Dependent on the six senses, contact arises.
7. Dependent on contact, feeling arises.
8. Dependent on feeling, craving arises.
9. Dependent on craving, clinging arises.
10. Dependent on clinging, the process of becoming arises.
11. Dependent on becoming, birth arises.
12. Dependent on birth; decay, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair arise.

Thus arises this whole mass of suffering.¹

Thus is explained the phenomena of past, present and future lives. Every kind of mixed action performed in a previous life may be termed an 'active life.' Due to this a 'relinking' takes place between the past life and the present one resulting in consciousness, mental and physical phenomena, the six senses and contact, which, with its relevant objects results in pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feelings. After birth, subsequent feelings lead to attachment which in turn pave the way for future birth.

¹ S. ii. 1.

This sequence may be divided into three sections; past action and present effect, present action and present effect, and present action and future effect.

All phenomena which we are capable of observing, together with many we may not be able to observe, hang together and interact as part and parcel of one larger phenomenon, of which our observations are only partial impressions. That is why we experience them as separate and attribute to them false notions of time and space. Our own sense capacities put together those things that we regard as units. When we speak of a city or a nation or a race, there are no definite outlines of the concepts which we must use in order to formulate our thoughts! The boundaries of a city are purely arbitrary and can be changed by proclamation. The units comprising a nation are separate individuals that need have no ethnological interrelations, whilst those belonging to a race may or may not be 'pure' stock. So too with childhood, youth and adulthood. Who can say at what day and hour one passes to the next stage? We have a general notion whether a person is a child or an adult but the periods of transition are indefinable. All things are in a state of flux, of motion, of adjustment, of response. It is our mind that creates the outlines and the limitations. We cannot say that the child is the cause of the youth and the youth that of the adult. They are interconnected states of the same set of circumstances. We attribute qualities, characteristics, notions to the various parts of the set, and then falsely treat those parts as independent units, calling one the cause of the other!

What there is, then, is not so much cause and effect as interrelation and interaction. The various parts interact, call forth a reaction one from the other. They are all there simultaneously, like the pages of a book or the frames of a film, but as they appear before our mind's eye so do we see them in succession. Not only this but we ourselves are part of the film, so to speak, not merely onlookers. We take part in the process of reaction: in fact, it is our reaction which creates our world for

us. We have the faculty of controlling our response to certain calls for reaction, both by suppression and by stimulation. Buddhism might be called the science of Response Control; Right Effort is to suppress the undesirable, the grosser response, and substitute the desirable, the more refined, for it. That kind of response is undesirable which is inextricably interrelated with suffering and pain: we say for brevity's sake, which causes suffering and pain, though what we really mean is that it is part of that set of circumstances. We have a similar verbal inaccuracy when we speak of the rising and setting of the sun or the moon. Our way of speaking does not deceive anyone with even the slightest degree of education. Likewise, when the Buddha speaks of cause and effect, it does not deceive anyone with the slightest amount of Right Understanding; it is a convenient way of expressing himself in familiar terms. We know that sets of circumstances of which pain and suffering are part, further entangle us; they are related with sensations of desire and indulgence in craving. Craving alone produces evil, pain, suffering and misery. This is the whole secret of Buddhism. Detachment is the keyword to the solution of the problem. Detachment alone leads to disentanglement; not because it is the cause of disentanglement, but because it is part and parcel of the set of circumstances of which disentanglement is one! Detachment is the avoidance of craving!

But if we cannot speak of cause and effect in this way, how is it that we have to wait after one phenomenon for the next one belonging to the same set to take place? Why do they not occur simultaneously? The answer is that we are so constituted that we cannot survey the entire field of experience at one glance. It is like reading a book or travelling a road. The entire road is there; though, on account of our particular mode of locomotion and our short range of vision, we can only be aware of a small portion of it at one time. But as we travel along, the remainder of the road enters our consciousness, little by little until, when we come to the end, we say we have travelled the road. But our

travelling is not the cause of the road, nor is any part of the road on which we find ourselves at any one time the cause of the next part. Nor even is our travelling the cause of our seeing the road, since we see but a little of it at any one time: the one is coincident with the other, not the cause of the other. It is all part and parcel of the same set of circumstances and we have the option to travel the road quickly or slowly, on foot or on horseback, on a bicycle or in a car, to look sideways or forwards. The set of circumstances is there: how shall we respond?

With regard to Dependent Origination, therefore, with one link present, the remaining eleven links must also be present; the 'Chain of Causation' being just a convenient expression. But just as a real wheel touches the ground at one point, so too **this** 'Wheel' with its twelve spokes impinges on our life stream at just one stage. Each link is necessary for ensuring the continuity of the whole structure, just as a broken or missing spoke in a real wheel would tend to weaken and eventually cause the collapse of the whole.

And what we should try and do is to cause the collapse of this Wheel of Becoming. This can be done by severing any of its links, the easiest links where this can be achieved are either the first one, that of ignorance, or the seventh, that of feeling.

We cannot therefore say that we produce kamma¹ as much as that we are kamma maintaining itself, adding to itself, enlarging itself and entangling itself. Ceasing to crave and to be attached is equivalent to

¹ Intentional activities or formations (*saṅkhārā*) are called kamma. Herein the three, namely; formations of merit, of demerit and of the imperturbable, and three, namely; the bodily, verbal and mental; which make six are formations with ignorance (*avijjā*) as condition. See Vism. 526.

ceasing to make any further kamma and putting an end to already existent kamma. And when existing kamma has become exhausted and no new kamma is engendered, there is an end to all suffering, and nibbāna will have been attained.

Thus we must understand that the illusory 'self' is a reactive principle which, for its very existence, requires the exercise of constant adaptation. This self is kamma, this exercise is kamma. If the adaptation can be made without undue strain the kamma involved is pleasant. If there is conflict involved the kamma is unpleasant or even painful. It is wise, therefore, to make ourselves so utterly adaptable; physically, mentally and emotionally; that, without attachment, we shall be able to respond immediately to any circumstances so we will never react at all to those sets of circumstances that are inherently undesirable. Buddhism provides us with a training that makes it possible to attain such a state.

This Dependent Origination is one of the most important factors in Buddhist philosophy. It is repeatedly discussed in the suttas, frequently with special reference to other opposing views of life. In this connection a passage from the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* may be of interest.

“There are, O monks, three views held by the heretics which, when followed by the learned, are calculated to land them in moral irresponsibility in spite of the perfection which they have attained. What are these three views? Some samaṇas and Brahmins maintain that whatever a man has in this life of pain or pleasure is purely due to predestination; others say that it is due to the will of God; others that it is due to blind chance.

“Now, O monks, when I find samaṇas and Brahmins holding or preaching such views I enquire of them whether they really believe in them. And when they answer in the affirmative I say to them, ‘So, then, you must acknowledge that men become murderers, thieves, adulterers, liars, etc. on account of fate, God’s will or blind chance. Accordingly, all attempts at improvement or distinction between right and wrong

becomes of no avail. Such being the case, the moral regeneration of the fallen becomes impossible.' This sort of reasoning must silence those who hold any of the three views mentioned above."¹

The reasoning of the Buddha may be somewhat too pragmatic to please the purely logical, but it serves to bring out quite clearly the theory that things have their origin in cause and effect, and that so far as our own destiny is concerned, we are responsible for the effects, inasmuch as we are responsible for the causes.

The doctrine of causation then, was, in the first place, associated with the doctrine of moral responsibility, but the doctrine was also connected with the two Buddhist marks of impermanence and soullessness. Nothing is permanent or self-existent. All things in the universe are the ephemeral products of various causes and conditions.

But while the branches of Buddhism are in agreement as to the validity of the causal law, on probably no point is there as much divergence as regards the interpretation of the details. In the *Nikāyas* we find only such phrases as 'Because of the existence of this, that exists; this arising, that also arises.' Nor is there any specific word which covers all forms of the causal law. We find only such words as '*ko hetu, ko paccaya*', for this cause, for this conditional relationship.

These two words were destined to have a curious history. In *Sthaviravāda* *hetu* came to have a very narrow significance, namely, to indicate the conditioning of certain states of consciousness by the three defilements; greed, hate and delusion. Hence those states of consciousness which are affected by these are called *sahetuka*, or possessed of cause (*hetu*). *Paccaya*, on the other hand, came to signify any form of causal relationship, or the various ways in which one thing could stand in relation to another. In fact, the last book of the *Abhidhamma* is

¹ A. i. 173.

concerned almost exclusively with the twenty-four *paccayas* or possible relationships between different phenomena.

On the other hand, by both the *Sarvastivādins* and the *Yogacārins*, the two terms were used in a very different way. Here *hetu* means cause proper, or direct or primary cause; while *paccaya* signifies general affecting conditions. In any particular causal nexus, *paccaya* means not the proper cause (which is *hetu*) but the additional circumstances under which a specified cause acted. *Hetu* then is primary cause, *paccaya* is secondary cause, and the two together bring about *phala* or the effect. Thus, for example, a seed is planted in the ground (which is *hetu*); through the influence of the earth, sun and rain (*paccaya*) it grows and the tree is the *phala*. Thus in contradistinction to the twenty-four *paccayas* of the *Theravāda*, we find in the *Sarvāstivāda* a list of six *hetus*.

With all branches of Buddhism the doctrine of causation is closely associated with the theory of kamma. Literally, kamma means action or deed, and that is still its most important significance. Later it came to have the added meaning of the result of action. It is in this sense we frequently meet the expression 'he has good kamma awaiting him'. Finally, it came to mean the whole law of causation when it has reference merely to moral retribution.

In the early days, and in *Sthaviravāda*, general causality and kamma were very sharply distinguished. Kamma was one of the many kinds of causes that may bring about a certain result. Thus, Nāgasena explains to Milinda¹ that although suffering may be caused by kamma, yet it may also be due to other causes. Even the Buddha suffered pain and illness, due to various external causes.

¹ Miln. 191.

“Suppose, O king, a clod of earth were to be thrown up in the air, and to fall again on the ground. Would it be in consequence of an act that it had previously done that it would fall?”

“No, venerable sir, there is no reason in the broad earth by which it could experience the result of either good or evil. It would be by reason of the present cause, independent of kamma, that the clod would fall again.”

“Well, O king, the Buddha should be regarded as the broad earth. As the clod would fall upon it irrespective of any act done to it, so also was it irrespective of any act done by him that the splinter of rock fell upon his foot.”

In like manner¹, though kamma may cause the death of a man, the death may be due to one of several reasons. Milinda cites external causes and kamma, while the *Abhidhammatthasangaha* gives:

1. expiration of life;
2. expiration of kamma;
3. expiration of both;
4. destructive kamma.

It should be noted, however, that there was a constant tendency to increase the scope of kamma. Thus in the *Kathāvatthu*, one of the seven *Abhidhamma* works of the *Sthaviravādins*, it is distinctly denied that matter can be due to karmic causality, while in the *Abhidhammatthasangaha*, the four things which are said to be the origins of material phenomena are: 1) kamma, 2) mind, 3) physical change, and 4) food.²

In the *Sarvastivādin* works it is repeatedly said that the cause of the re-creation of the universe is the aggregate effect of the kamma of the sentient beings in the past, while in the later *Mahāyāna* schools,

¹ Cf. Phil. 149.

² Page 161.

where the basis of the whole universe is said to be mind, the appearance of the whole universe is due to kamma and its corollaries.

Buddhists believe that the doctrine of cause and condition is universal as regards 1) place, 2) time, and 3) object.

1. Causal law applies uniformly to all portions of the universe, both in the innumerable material worlds and in the various heavens and hells.
2. Causal law applies to the three periods of time; past, present and future. To a Buddhist this means, moreover, that the circle of causality is endless; that there never was a beginning and there will never be an end. Hence they reject the belief in a first or ultimate cause. Vasubandhu has a long and very interesting passage in the *Abhidharma-kośa* defining the Buddhist position on this point.¹
3. It applies to all objects. The only exceptions are the *Asankhata dhammas*, which are eternal and uncaused. All the *Sankhata dhammas*, however, whether *rūpa*, *citta* or *cetasika* have only a dependent or conditioned existence, and are without any substantial existence of their own. Buddhism distinguishes itself from most other systems by applying the doctrine of causality and non-substantiality to the mind as well as to the body.

We are told, moreover, that even the Buddhas are subject to causality:

“Even the Buddhas of the three ages have not been and shall not be able to alter this great law.”

¹ A.K. 7-6a.

This is a very important point, inasmuch as it is a doctrine which distinguishes Buddhism from practically every other religion. In most other systems of thought, though the causal relationship is in some way recognised, the higher powers, especially the Supreme Being, are considered superior to this law, and are able, as shown by their miracles, temporarily to abrogate it. Buddhism, though it accepts the possibility of miracles, seeks to correlate them with causality. The favourite theory of the higher law is introduced. Just as physical scientists are able, by increased knowledge, to bring about results which to an ordinary man seem marvellous, so too, according to Buddhism, do sages possess certain powers gained by good kamma, which enable them to control the elements. To the Buddhist, increase in the power of vision by means of the telescope is neither more nor less miraculous than increase of vision (clairvoyance) by means of the cultivation of the psychic faculties. Even in *Mahāyāna* where the Buddhas accomplish the salvation of sentient beings, this salvation must be effected through causal agencies.

One final point deserves attention – all schools of Buddhism agree that nothing can be produced by the action of a single cause; every dhamma is the result of at least two causes. In the first instance this doctrine was probably directed against the doctrine of *Isvara* or the creating deity, but in later times it came to imply that to produce an effect a cause requires adventitious aid from without. It is not, therefore, true to say that every cause necessarily has an effect, because some single causes, finding no favourable conditions, never come to fruition. It is possible, moreover, for a strong cause to render a weak cause barren.

The Buddhists applied their theory of causality in two ways. The first was from the point of view of the groups of *dhammas* taken as a whole, more particularly the personality, human or otherwise. The second was from the point of view of each of the *dhammas* taken

separately. The first, therefore, we may call synthetic, the second analytical.

The first aspect was prominent even in the early period of Buddhist philosophy, and was merely the development of the theory of kamma, showing how, for certain causal reasons a man would be reborn at death in a happy or unhappy state. The later schools did little more than systematize or formularize the older doctrines. This aspect of causality was largely centred around the old formula, known as the *Paticca Samuppāda*.

The second aspect only becomes prominent in the *Abhidhamma*. Here an attempt was made to distinguish and define the fundamental types of causes, and show how the various kinds of personalities and all other combinations came into being by the action of these types of causes upon various single *dhammas*.



